DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 023 CS 206 739

AUTHOR Farrell, Jacqueline M.
TITLE History, Real People, and the English Class.
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (71st, Boston, MA, November 20-25, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English Instruction; *Fiction; *History; Junior High Schools; *Literature Appreciation; Middle Schools; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Historical Fiction

ABSTRACT

Incorporating history and historical fiction into the English class serves to foster the interdependence of skills and content. Historical fiction can help students to understand the physical, mental, and emotional climate of another time while providing them with a common topic for a discussion of setting, characterization, and point of view. Historical fiction for middle school students should have a setting prior to the late 1960s. It is important that the literature be historical in terms of the students' life-span, not the teacher's or one arbitrarily set by publishers. Guidelines for organizing a unit on historical fiction might include (1) choosing an historical era to which the students can relate, (2) organizing a class investigation of the period, (3) reading together a short story set in the same historical period before assigning individualized readings of novels, (4) providing students with a list of historical fiction set in the chosen era, and (5) discussing the books. (A sample unit on historical fiction of the 1930s and 1940s is appended.) (HOD)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jacqueline M. Farrell
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED213023

# History, Real People, and the English Class

Presented by: Jacqueline M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Connecticut
Presented at: NCTE Convention
Session 8C.1
Boston, Massachusetts
November 21, 1981

CS201739

J.M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Connecticut

History, Real People, and the English Class

In this discussion, I wish to address four questions. Why combine history and real people with the English class? How should we define and evaluate historical fiction which is appropriate to middle school readers? Why do students need a special introduction to historical fiction? Which literary elements should be emphasized when teaching historical fiction to this age level? I would then like to propose a set of guidelines for developing a unit on historical fiction, and, finally, to allow time for us to discuss some of these points and share our experiences with this genre.

First of all, why combine history and real people with the English class? There are several reasons. Students need to read, write, listen to, and speak about the content of their subject area classes, and especially about their social and cultural heritage. The "Essentials of Education" document emphasizes this interdependence of skills and content. Incorporating history and historical fiction into the English class serves to foster those goals. At the same time, history and historical fiction provide the English class with a content. After all, we cannot effectively teach the language arts skills in isolation. In addition, we are provided with a format for teaching research skills in a manner in which they can be directly applied to a class project. Equally important, or perhaps more important, is the fact that historical fiction helps our students to understand the physical, mental, and emotional climate of another time while providing us with a common topic for a discussion of setting, characterization, and point of view--without requiring that every student

read the same book. Therefore, historical fiction also enables us to accommodate the variety of reading levels and abilities which we find within our English classes.

Now, having decided that it is valuable to teach historical fiction to middle school students, we need to clearly define what constitutes historical fiction. I believe that it is appropriate for us to define historical fiction for middle school students as fiction which has a setting prior to the late 1960's. In other words, set at any time before the majority of our students were born. It is important that it be historical in terms of their life-span, not ours, not one arbitrarily set by publishers.

Such a broad definition requires that we evaluate the historical fiction that we present to our students. But how do we distinguish between the good and the mediocre? First of all, the setting should have a strong influence upon the plot, upon the way the characters behave and the problems they must solve. This setting should also be an authentic representation of its time and place, and the author should refer to people and events of the time. In addition, the characters should be credible, not only for their own time and place, but for all times and all places. They should illustrate the fact that in spite of differences in lifestlyes, all people share the same emotions and face similar problems. Good historical fiction should shed light on our problems and feelings today, not merely chronicle those of another generation.

Considering this similarity, this common ground, between our students and the characters in good historical fiction, why do middle school students need a special introduction to the genre? First of all, most of our students are just beginning to move beyond the stage of concrete operations; reasoning with abstract

concepts is still difficult for them. Many cannot readily distinguish between fantasy and history, between the far-fetched and the actual. For them, the concept of life without blow dryers, cassette recorders, and color television is as beyond belief as any world ever created by Lloyd Alexander, C.S. Lewis, or Ray Bradbury. Therefore, we need to emphasize the reality of the setting when we assign books set in times other than their lifetimes. Secondly, in order to fully appreciate, and more importantly to react to, historical fiction, students need to be aware of the historical, social, and emotional climate of that time. Individually, they may not have that background. But together they can pool their resources and talents to develop the necessary background.

Finally, in discussing historical fiction with junior high students, which literary elements should we emphasize? In my opinion, there are three elements which are of primary importance: setting, point of view, and characterization.

First of all: setting. They should become aware of the many ways in which setting influences plot. They should come to understand that the time and place of the novel creates conflicts which the characters must resolve and determines the manner in which they solve them.

Secondly: point of view. I do not mean point of view in terms of identifying first person, third person, or omniscent, but in terms of the point of view of the historical period under discussion. For example, there are two excellent works of historical fiction set during the American Revolution which are appropriate for middle school students. One is Esther Forbes' Johnny Tremain; the other is the Colliers' My Brother Sam is Dead. To briefly refresh your memories, Johnny Tremain is a silversmith's apprentice, living in Boston during the months

prior to the events at Lexington and Concord. As the result of an accident, he goes to work for a publisher and is privy to the political discussions of Paul Revere, Sam Adams, and John Hancock. This political view of the Revolution presented in Johnny Tremain is quite different from the view of the Revolution presented in My Brother Sam is Dead. Set in the Tory countryside of western Connecticut, this book presents the Revolution through the bewildered eyes of a boy who is not quite sure of the reasons for the war, but is certain of its negative effects on his family. He doen't care much for politics; he does care about having his father and brother back again. Separately, the two books present distinct pictures of American life during the Revolution. Together, they complement each other and allow students to see two perspectives of the same historical events.

The third element of primary importance is characterization. In discussing the novels, we should lead our students to an awareness of the ways in which the characters are similar to people today. The following questions might be considered. What are the families in the story like? Are they like most families today? What is the relationship of parents to children? What do the main characters want in life, struggle for, rebel against, or hope for? How does that compare with what is important to you and what you want out of life? How does the person solve his/her problems? Were you able to learn anything from the character's behavior?

In designing a unit on historical fiction for a junior high English class, the purposes for including historical fiction in the curriculum, the need for a special introduction to this genre, and its primary literary elements must all be taken into consideration. I wish to suggest the following guidelines for developing such a unit.

Jacqueline M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Connecticut

# Guidelines for Organizing a Unit on Historical Fiction

I. Choose an historical era to which the students can relate or with which they can easily make a connection because of locale.

II. Develop their backgrounds. Organize a class investigation of the period. By means of individual or small group directed reading-thinking activities, have students research various aspects of the period: famous people, important events, fashion, music, sports, entertainment, etc.

Students may present their information to the class in one of the following formats: a)a newspaper or news magazine containing accounts of important events, feature articles on famous people, fashion up-dates, entertainment listings, etc., b)a video-taped television documentary on the decade(s). The major advantage of doing a news magazine rather than a television documentary is that the students can refer to it as they are reading their novels.

III. Before assigning individualized readings of novels, read together a short story set in the same historical period. This gives you an opportunity to introduce the students to the literary elements of historical fiction which you wish to emphasize in this unit: point of view, the importance of setting, and the setting's influence upon plot and characterization.

IV. Provide students with a list of historical fiction set in the chosen era. Include materials at a variety of reading levels.

J. M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Connecticut

V. As a class, discuss the books. You should emphasize not only the similarities in experience and emotions which result from the fact that the main characters live during the same period but also the differences in their experiences which result from varying perspectives on world events.

In order to facilitate the class discussion, students could complete and share the following activities: a)"My Problem and How I Solved It," a personal affadavit of the type often seen in popular magazines, and b)a letter from the main character to Dear Abby or Ann Landers in which he/she outlines his/her problem.

Jacqueline M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Connecticut

# Guidelines for Organizing a Unit on Historical Fiction

I. Choose an historical era to which the students can relate or with which they can easily make a connection because of locale.

II. Develop their backgrounds. Organize a class investigation of the period. By means of individual or small group directed reading-thinking activities, have students research various aspects of the period: famous people, important events, fashion, music, sports, entertainment, etc.

Students may present their information to the class in one of the following formats: a)a newspaper or news magazine containing accounts of important events, feature articles on famous people, fasion up-dates, entertainment listings, etc., b) a video-taped television documentary on the decade(s). The major advantage of doing a news magazine rather than a television documentary is that the students can refer to it as they are reading their novels.

III. Before assigning individualized readings of novels, read together a short story set in the same historical period. This gives you an opportunity to introduce the students to the literary elements of historical fiction which you wish to emphasize in this unit: point of view, the importance of setting and its influence upon plot and characterization.

IV. Provide students with a list of historical fiction wet in the chosen era. Include materials at a variety of reading levels.

V. As a class, discuss the books. You should emphasize not only the similarities in experience and emotions which result from the fact that the main characters live during the same period but also the differences in their experiences which result from varying perspectives on world events.

In order to facilitate the class discussion, students could complete and share the following activities: 1) "My Problem and How I Solved It," a personal affadavit of the type often seen in popular magazines, and b) a letter from the main character to Dear Abby or Ann Landers in which he/she outlines his/her problem.

Jacqueline M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Connecticut

# SAMPLE UNIT
## Historical Fiction of the 1930's and 1940's

Objectives:

1. To help students to differentiate between historical fiction and other types of fiction and/or biography.
2. To help students to identify the setting, plot, main characters, point-of-view, and conflict in a novel and to see how these elements are related.
3. To develop the students' abilities to see that setting influences plot.
4. To acquaint students with the events and people of the 1930's and 1940's.
5. To reinforce the students' basic writing skills: composing complete sentences, using capital letters and punctuation correctly, and following the rules of standard English usage.
6. To reinforce the students' ability to locate information in reference works, specifically non-fiction books and encyclopedias.
7. To have students plan and practice effective interviewing techniques.

Procedure:

1. Introduce the students to the era by having them listen to a recording of radio shows of the 1930's and 1940's: "The Shadow," "The Lone Ranger," "Terry and the Pirates," and some of the soap operas. (A recording is available from the Longines Symphonette Society, Symphonette Square, Larchmont, New York.) Lead the students into a discussion in which they predict ways in which the lives of people at that time would differ from their lives today.
2. Assignment: Interview a grandparent, older relative, or neighbor about life in the 1930's and 1940's. First, decide what questions you wish to ask the person. For example, How old were you in 1930? 1940? What school activities were available then? How did you spend your leisure time? What did this town look like then? What types of clothing and music were in style? What are your memories of the Depression? of World War II?--Either take notes or tape the person's response? Secondly, summarize what you found out about life in the 1930's and 1940's as a result of interviewing this person. Be prepared to present your findings orally in class.
3. Individual DR-TA's. Assignment: Using non-fiction and reference works, locate information about the following:
   a) people--Winston Churchill, Calvin Coolidge, Charles DeGaulle, Dwight David Eisenhower, Adolf Hitler, Herbert Hoover, Charles Lindbergh, Charles MacArthur, Mussolini, George Patton, Frances Perkins, Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Harry Truman
   b) sports heroes--Roger Bannister, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens
   c) music--the Big Band Sound, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, jazz, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Frank Sinatra
   d) comic strips--Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, Little Orphan Annie
   e) movies--Fred Astaire, Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, the Marx brothers, Shirley Temple
   f) events--Prohibition, the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Depression, Pearl Harbor, World War II

J.M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Ct.

After you have located your information, write the type of newspaper story which is most appropriate: a) a straight news story (who what, when, where, why), b) a biographical feature article on the life of a famous person, c) a music or record review column, d) brief "People in the News" fillers about musicians or movie stars, 3) a sports news article.

4. The newspaper articles may then be reproduced so that students will have the information to refer to while reading the books.
5. Read together the first chapter of Ann Holm's North to Freedom. The class discussion should center about the students' reactions to the boy's plight and his emotions during the escape.
6. Allow the students to choose books from the attached list of historical fiction of the 1930's and 1940's.
7. As a class, discuss the books. Emphasize not only the similarities in experiences and emotions which result from the fact that the main characters are living through the Depression and/or World War II, but also their different perspectives of those events.

Jacqueline M. Farrell
Schaghticoke Middle School
New Milford, Connecticut

# Bibliography

## Historical Fiction of the 1930's and 1940's

Setting: United States, 1930's

Brenner, Barbara. A Year in the Life of Rosie Bernard. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
Burch, Robert. Queenie Peavy. New York: Viking, 1966.
Cohen, Barbara. Benny. New York: Lothrop, 1977.
Collier, James L. Give Dad My Best. New York: Scholastic, 1976.
Colman, Hila. Ellie's Inheritance. New York: Morrow, 1979.
Hamner, Earl, Jr. Spencer's Mountain. New York: Random House
Homecoming. New York: Random House
Karp, Naomi, J. Nothing Rhymes with April. New York: Harcourt, 1974.
Langton, Jane. Her Majesty, Grace Jones. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
Lee, Mildred. The Rock and the Willow. New York: Lothrop, 1963.
Murray, Michele. The Crystal Nights.
Rabe, Berniece. The Girl Who Had No Name. New York: Dutton, 1977.
Richard, Adrienne. Pistol. Boston: Little Brown, 1969.
Snyder, Zelpha K. The Truth about Stone Hollow. New York: Atheneum, 1974.
Taylor, Mildred. Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. New York: Dial, 1976.
Song of the Trees. New York: Dial, 1975.
Thrasher, Crystal. The Dark Didn't Catch Me. New York: Atheneum, 1975.

Setting: United States, 1940's

Brancato, Robin F. Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree. New York: Knopf, 1975.
Burch, Robert. Hut School and the War-Time Home Front Heroes. New York: Viking, 1974.
Burch, Robert. The Whitman Kick. New York: Dutton, 1977.
Clifton, Lucille. The Times They Used to Be. New York: Holt, 1974.
DeAngeli, Marguerite. Bright April. New York: Doubleday, 1946.
Enright, Elizabeth. The Saturdays. New York: Holt, 1941.
Then There Were Five. New York: Holt, 1944.
Green, Phyllis. Wild Violets.
Greene, Bette. Summer of My German Soldier. New York: Dial, 1973.
Hickman, Janet. The Stones. New York: Macmillan, 1976.
LeVoy, Myron. Alan and Naomi. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
Moser, Don. A Heart to the Hawks. New York: Atheneum, 1975.
Rabe, Berniece. Naomi. New York: Nelson, 1975.
Rauch, Constance. The Spy on Riverside Drive. New York: Popular Library, 1977.
Rock, Gail. The Thanksgiving Treasure. New York: Knopf, 1974.
Sachs, Marilyn. Peter and Veronica. New York: Doubleday, 1969.

Setting: Europe, 1940's

Balderson, Margaret. When Jays Fly to Barmbo. New York: World, 1969.
Bawden, Nina. Carrie's War. New York: World, 1973.
Burton, Hester. In Spite of All Terror. New York: World, 1969.
Forester, C.S. The Last Nine Days of the Bismarck. Boston: Little Brown, 1959.
Forman, James. Horses of Anger. New York: Farrar, 1967.
The Traitors. New York: Farrar, 1968.
Ring the Judas Bell. New York: Farrar, 1965.

Grund, Josef Carl. Never to be Free. Boston: Little Brown, 1970.
Haugaard, Erik. The Little Fishes. Boston: Houghton, 1967.
Holm, Anne. North to Freedom. New York: Harcourt, 1965.
Kerr, Judith. When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit. New York: Coward, 1972.
Levitan, Sonia. Journey to America. New York: Atheneum, 1970.
Reis, Johanna. The Upstairs Room. New York: Crowell, 1972.
Richter, Hans Peter. Friedrich. New York: Holt, 1970.
Serraillier, Ian. The Silver Sword. New York: Criterion, 1959.
Tunis, John R. Silence over Dunkerque. New York: Morrow, 1962.
Vivier, Colette. House of the Four Winds. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
Westall, Robert. The Machine Gunners. New York: Greenwillow, 1976.